

What the West Should Do If Putin Uses a Nuclear Weapon (Opinion)
James Stavridis - Time

As Vladimir Putin becomes more desperate in Ukraine, watching his killed-in-action tally rise weekly alongside the butcher's bill of destroyed equipment, his thoughts will turn to other options. We've already seen him launch a significant bombing campaign directed against critical Ukrainian infrastructure—primarily the electric grid—just in time to threaten civilians with blackouts and freezing home temperatures.



Russian President Vladimir Putin oversees the training of the strategic deterrence forces, troops responsible for responding to threats of nuclear war, via a video link in Moscow on October 26, 2022. © Alexei Babushkin- SPUTNIK/AFP

Like his conventional ground attack, that tactic will likely fail. Just as the British responded with high morale and determination to the Nazi terror bombings of World War II, the Ukrainians will continue to coalesce around their inspirational leader, [Volodymyr Zelensky](#), and above all continue to defend their homeland.

Once Putin realizes he cannot win with air power and terror bombings, he may [consider seriously](#) using a tactical nuclear weapon or a radioactive “dirty bomb.” What should the west do if he chooses to do so?

This is a real possibility. A few days ago, in a strange move, the Russian Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, reached out to several NATO counterparts, including the U.S., United Kingdom, and France. He laid out a preposterous lie, purporting to have evidence that the Ukrainians were preparing to use a “[dirty bomb](#)” soon.

These “dirty bombs” are simply large explosives combined with radioactive material—they scatter the radioactivity around a large area, although the lethal effects are actually relatively small. The NATO ministers correctly pushed back strongly, including issuing a joint statement denying such a scheme existed.

This smells like the Kremlin laying the tracks for a classic “false flag” operation, meaning they would detonate such a weapon, then point an accusing finger at the Ukrainians. The Russians have done exactly that with their Syrian partners, using chemical weapons against their opponents but accusing the Syrian rebels and the U.S. of having planted them or even of having used them actively themselves. Additionally, Putin continues to muse in public on using a tactical nuclear weapon, an even more serious device that can be “dialed up” to destroy city blocks and large troop formations. Russian hard right commentators routinely encourage him to do so.

Fears grow over possible nuclear strike from Russia

Should Putin become desperate enough (and pressured enough by his own far right, who demand far stronger pressure on Ukraine and defiance of the west) to use a radioactive weapon—either a dirty bomb or a tactical nuclear weapon—the west should respond forcefully and immediately along these lines:

Publicize and condemn the Russian use of nuclear weapons, the first use since the Second World War

*Provide incontrovertible evidence that the radiation is the result of Russian activity
Demand Russian expulsion from the U.N. Security Council, going through the General Assembly to overcome a presumed Russian veto in the U.N. Security Council.
Push China, India, and other major “swing voter” nations to condemn Putin and cut off trade with Russia*

Confiscate all Russian financial assets in western hands, around \$300 billion, for the express use of reconstructing Ukraine

Deliver MIG-29 Soviet era fighter aircraft (currently in the hands of the Poles) to the Ukrainians immediately, as their pilots already fly them very capably. In this scenario, the U.S. would immediately backfill with F-16s to Warsaw.

Consider giving the Ukrainians U.S. F-16 fighter aircraft, particularly some of the early models. These are relatively simple to fly, very lethal in both air-to-air scenarios and in air-to-ground attacks. The U.S. would train a cadre of Ukrainian pilots, probably taking them to Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany.

Increase the supply of advanced surface to air defensive missile systems, probably older Hawk systems but also the modern Patriot (wide area, relatively easy to train to operate) and Iron Dome (developed jointly with Israel, excellent point defense systems to be used around big population centers and critical infrastructure)

Strongly consider putting up a NATO “no fly” zone in support of the Ukrainian air forces, using NATO jets operating out of Polish and German bases.

Strongly consider a response in the world of cyber, particularly going after Russian military capabilities aggressively.

Directly and overtly target the Russian Black Sea fleet and provide Ukraine with the intelligence and long-range cruise missiles to sink a significant number of high value warships.

All of these measures should be communicated now to Putin, so he understands the reaction to his use of radioactive weapons would be swift and formidable.

One thing we should not contemplate is responding in kind, with NATO nuclear capability. Although the Alliance has such means and recently conducted its annual exercises demonstrating this ability, avoiding further nuclear escalation must be avoided at all costs.

The war in Ukraine is going badly for Putin. But he must understand it will go even more badly—exponentially so—if he reaches for the lever to use a radioactive nuclear device of any kind.